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SOVIET MISHAP TIED TO GERM-WAR PLANT

U.S. Sees Possible Breach of Ban
in Reportedly Fatal Accident

By BERNARD GWERTZMAN

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 18 — The United States said today that it had received "disturbing indications" that a large number of people in Sverdlovsk, a major Soviet city, might have been accidentally contaminated a year ago by a "lethal biological agent."

A State Department spokesman, David Passage, said an "outbreak of disease" in Sverdlovsk, a city of 1.2 million people, had raised questions whether the Soviet Union had violated the terms of a 1975 convention that bans the development, production or stockpiling of biological agents or toxins.

"The United States has recently expressed concern to the Soviet Union about these reports," he said. The matter is being discussed this week in Geneva at a meeting on problems arising from the treaty that bans germ warfare and was signed by the United States, the Soviet Union and 85 other countries, he said.

Although a West German publication had asserted that more than 1,000 people died after an explosion in a plant producing bacteriological weapons, the American spokesman provided few details.

"There have been some disturbing indications," the spokesman said, "that an outbreak of disease in the Soviet city of

Sverdlovsk in the spring of 1979 may have resulted from inadvertent exposure of large numbers of people to some sort of lethal biological agent."

"The indications raise questions about whether such material was present in quantities inconsistent with the ban in the biological weapons convention on developing, producing, stockpiling, acquiring or retaining biological agents or toxins."

The matter came to light in unusual fashion. On Friday, the daily report of the Foreign Broadcasts Information Service, a Government agency that publishes transcripts of broadcasts and reprints some articles from the foreign press, carried two items from the newspaper Bild Zeitung of Hamburg, a sensationalist tabloid with a circulation of 4.7 million.

The two items, published Oct. 27, 1979, and Feb. 13, dealt with reports of explosions in Soviet plants allegedly making bacteriological weapons.

It is rare for the Government's foreign broadcasts report to carry material more than two weeks old. There was speculation that publication of the Bild Zeitung articles was designed to stimulate public discussion as part of the Government's effort to discredit the Soviet Union following its intervention in Afghanistan.

This was substantiated by a senior intelligence official who said the timing was "no accident." He said publication of the reports from Bild Zeitung was "part of a major effort to rev up public opinion about Soviet activity in the area of chemical and biological warfare." There have been persistent reports of Soviet use of chemical agents, such as poison gas, against Afghan insurgents.

Another official said the United States had evidence to believe that the agent in the Sverdlovsk accident was a highly potent bacteria that causes the disease known as anthrax, which is almost always fatal to humans when inhaled. He said there was evidence that 300 to 500 people died in a matter of hours and that Soviet troops had sealed off the area when the accident occurred.

Sverdlovsk, 875 miles east of Moscow, is the center of a major Soviet industrial district in the Ural Mountains, with a wide range of mineral extraction and manufacturing. The city, with a population of 1.2 million, is one of the country's leading producers of heavy machinery, including metallurgical and chemical equipment. Prior to 1924 it was known as Yekaterinburg, and it was here that Czar Nicholas II and his family were killed by the Bolsheviks in 1918.

Area Off Limits to Foreigners

Together with the entire Urals region, Sverdlovsk is normally off limits to foreigners, presumably because of the presence of military industries. In view of the travel ban, the State Department spokesman was asked about the Government's source of information.

"The information has come to us over a period of time and we have in effect been compiling additional information as it became available," he said. "It was only recently that we felt we had enough information that we should probably approach the Soviets about it in the terms of the biological convention. We are not necessarily charging a violation."

Intelligence aides said the information had been based on accounts from Soviet emigrants from the area. There was no independent confirmation.

The account in Bild Zeitung, which some officials said was probably exaggerated, said "deadly bacteria polluted the air" after an explosion in a plant making bacteriological weapons on April 3, 1979. People were contaminated by breathing in the agent, it said, and a special section was set up in a hospital staffed by army doctors and nurses to handle the cases.

The Bild Zeitung article said there was no remedy and "contaminated people died within four hours after hospitalization because their lungs and trachea were paralyzed."

There has been no known account of such an incident in the Soviet press, but this in itself is not unusual. However, the Soviet Government press agency, Tass, did rebut the West German articles in its international service, aimed at foreign audiences. The rebuttal, on Feb. 19, said that Bild Zeitung was contributing to "anti-Soviet hysteria" and that the Soviet Union was adhering strictly to the 1975 convention on bacteriological weapons.

"This report by the West German paper is from beginning to end a malicious invention that has absolutely nothing to do with actual fact," the Soviet press agency said.

The convention on banning bacteriological weapons was signed in 1972 and went into effect three years later. Under its terms, the signers undertake not to develop, produce, stockpile or acquire biological agents or toxins "of types and in quantities that have no justification for prophylactic, protective or other peaceful use."

All such material was supposed to have been destroyed by late 1975. In January 1976, all heads of Federal departments certified to President Gerald R. Ford that, as of Dec. 26, 1975, their departments and agencies were in full compliance with the convention.

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On 19 February 1980, FBIS monitored a TASS report denying published West German press reports concerning an alleged explosion at a Soviet biological weapon factory in Sverdlovsk. This was published routinely by FBIS in its 20 February DAILY REPORT. As a result, an analyst reading the DAILY REPORT asked FBIS to translate the original articles published in BILD ZEITUNG. Inasmuch as FBIS normally does not read this newspaper, FBIS^P went back to the 21 October 1979 and 13 February 1980 articles and translated them. On receipt they were published in the 14 March DAILY REPORT.